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ABSTRACT

A summer English class for gifted fifth- through eighth-grade students was designed to allow students to interact with literature by adapting short-stories into plays that the students then produced, performed, and filmed. During the prewriting phase, students discussed qualities most essential to a story or film, and compared a short story with its film version. Students then completed a teacher developed learning activity packet on adapting short stories into plays. During the writing/selection phase, students worked independently adapting the stories they had selected, sharing them with peers and adults for feedback, and revising their writing based on evaluations and guidelines established in earlier classes. The class was then divided into two groups, each with actors and technicians, who chose one play they felt they could best produce in the required time. During the production phase, actors rehearsed, technicians practiced with their equipment, and technical scripts were prepared. Rehearsals were filmed to allow additional practice and self-evaluation. On each of the last three days of the class, the two productions were filmed as performances, each successive performance showing improvement over the previous one. One of the films placed second in a county film festival competition. (Student responses to the course and festival proposal are included.) (HTH)

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The Adaptation of Short Stories into Screenplays: A Language Arts Program for the Gifted

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CS 210 103

The Adaptation of Short Stories into Screenplays; A Language Arts Program for the Gifted

- Chris Paulls
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"That's the only thing that's worse than school? Summer school." Not exactly a joke and hardly a claim to fame, this was the attitude of most students and teachers I'd known, including myself. No one in her right mind, however close to personal bankruptcy and desperate for a summer job, would ever consent to teach there: It's a first cousin to the house of correction and a euphemism for the juvenile detention center. Certainly, the place held nothing of life or love or joy, and Dante must have attended one when he penned, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Then came word, one spring, that the next summer school in my district would include an English course for gifted students and that, contrary to the typical summer curriculum of remedial basic skills, this one would require a teacher-designed extension and enrichment of the regular curriculum. This would be a dream-come-true: Students who not only wanted to be in class, but also were willing to pay for it; a pupil-teacher ratio of 20:1; an opportunity to try some ideas I'd considered for a long time. . .and a job.

With the job came several other factors that increased the challenge. Fifth through eighth grade students from throughout the county would comprise the class. I would know nothing of them beyond what the standard screening criteria for the gifted program reflected. Finally, I would have to plan for, motivate, and teach this class three and one half hours per day, five days per week, for four weeks: seventy hours in all.

In light of these considerations, I decided to design a unit in which students would not only involve themselves with literature, but also they would interact with it, interpret it, reshape it, and re-create it: All this could be done through the adaptation of short stories into plays which the students would produce, perform, and film. My final plans fell into three parts: A pre-writing phase, a writing/selection phase, and a production phase. Generally,

activities were to progress from teacher-directed to student-centered.

PRE-WRITING PHASE

We began by brainstorming the elements of things which we would call dramatic—in life, first, and then in literature. Students gave qualities that contribute to drama, supported by examples. Some words they gave were: emotion, surprise, suspense, excitement, mystery, power, action and struggle. After our ideas were exhausted, we looked them over, culled out those which for one reason or another seemed inappropriate, combined those which were synonymous, and categorized the remaining terms according to their similarities. This activity caused the class to focus on drama in its broadest sense and to sharpen their peripheral vision of those things which affect it.

This discussion led us to prioritize the qualities we had listed, from those which are most essential to a story or film (ie., without which the drama would be lost or seriously reduced) to those which are least. *Action*, *struggle*, and *suspense* ranked highest on the list. We viewed a film and read a short story so that our generalizations could be grounded in specific examples.

Our next activity grew from our reading and discussion of the short story that we had read, "The Adventure of Silver Blaze," by A. Conan Doyle. I had chosen this story for its suspenseful qualities and because our county owned a copy of the film adaptation of that tale, *Silver Blaze*, adapted by Julian Bond. As a class our concern in making adaptations of our own would be to create a script which was as true as possible to the plots and characters of the original, and yet, to overcome those characteristics of the narrative which would, if maintained in the film, reduce its dramatic impact. One such problematic characteristic is the first person narration of the Doyle story; to attempt to sustain that perspective in the film and allow Watson to tell the viewer as much as he does in the narrative, would be fatal to the action and drama of the film.

Our discussion, then, encouraged the students to predict ways in which the film would differ from the short story. The students first marked in their copies of the narrative where they thought a problem would exist in adapting it for screen use; then, they noted how they thought the problem would be resolved. After each student finished jotting ideas, we discussed them and made a class list of the most significant of those mentioned. Next, we viewed the film to evaluate our predictions and to note the changes that we had not anticipated. In our subsequent discussion, we evaluated our predictions, noted any variations, and, most importantly, discussed the purposes underlying each of the changes. Without exception, each had been made to sustain the drama of the film; we returned to our earlier list of the essential qualities of drama and revised it.

In our comparison of the narrative and film versions of the

story, we studied the script for the film to promote discussion of not only content, but also form. We discussed the different purposes of short stories and film scripts: One is to engage a reader, and the second is to serve as a tool for an actor or actress. Our observations provided guidelines for the format of their later adaptations of stories into film scripts.

The next set of activities was completed independently. I designed a learning activity packet (LAP) entitled, "How to Adapt Short Stories into Plays." Its objectives included,

1. Translating direct quotations into play dialogue
2. Translating descriptive narration into stage directions
3. Creating the Cast of Characters
4. Describing the setting for the opening of a scene
5. Creating dialogue to supply information formerly conveyed by the first person narrator
6. Creating stage directions for voice, appearance, and action from implied sources in the narrative
7. Adapting a short narrative to play form
8. Evaluating adaptations by comparing them to the work of other students and by performing them in a readers' theater setting

Within the packet examples and practice exercises were drawn from stories that we had previously read and ones that we had not, and activities shifted from individual, written ones to ones requiring collaboration with other students. The pupils worked at their own pace, and the teacher assisted whenever necessary.

As students finished their work in the LAP, they began their search for stories that would be suitable for adaptation. They shared their ideas with me and with each other before choosing one to adapt. Major limitations we considered were our time constraints, the number of characters involved, and the length of the piece. In several cases, students adapted excerpts or even condensed or combined longer stories into a shorter form. In general, the writing reflected an assimilation of the concepts and skills that had been taught in and prior to the LAP.

At this time in our pre-writing phase, the class visited the Maryland Center for Public Broadcasting. The center's head script-writer talked to us about considerations in scriptwriting and answered questions relating to the projects we were doing. A tour of the production facilities followed in which we saw various studios and the stages of television production. This experience—getting to see the business of production and the complicated, technical equipment—fascinated us. When we returned to our work, the students had a new drive and enthusiasm to endure the tedium of writing and revising, so that they could try their hands at the video equipment which we would use.

The last part of the pre-writing phase provided a change of pace in the middle of the daily routine. Each day we spent twenty to thirty minutes on creative dramatics activities, beginning with simple improvisations—such as two men arm wrestling, a person

and her image in a mirror—and progressing to more complex, restrictive improvisations. At first these activities helped with orientation and later with developing skills that would be needed by actors.

WRITING/SELECTION PHASE

During this segment of the course, students worked independently (and rapidly) making their adaptations, sharing them with peers and adults for feedback, and revising their writing based on evaulations and guidelines we had established in earlier classes. As they completed their adaptations, they began to research the various tasks necessary for the production of an adapted play: Screenwriter, director/producer, camera technician, actor/actress, and special effects technician were major jobs; typist and props and scenery crew were minor.

The class was told in advance what tasks would be involved and had already begun thinking about what they wanted to do. A classroom library contained books on most areas listed above, and for the technicians I had all the equipment we would use set up and waiting when they finished writing.

Once all of the students had finished writing and had signed up for the particular task they wanted to perform, I divided the class into two production groups, providing each with equal numbers of actors, technicians, and so on. These groups then discussed the plays that had been written in the group and chose the one they felt they could best produce in the time remaining and with the personnel they were given.

The next step was perhaps the most crucial part of the course, for it was at this point that I turned the responsibility for the productions over to the students. With the assistance (as advisors) of myself and three intern teachers who worked with me, the students regrouped according to the tasks they had chosen and wrote specific job contracts which prescribed what, how, and when things were to be done. The contract was between the student and the director/producer of his or her production, with me as a consultant. Producer's contracts were with me. I made it clear that I was not in charge of each group's activities. The producers, in writing their contracts with me, had to set goals for their groups, and supervise the writing of contracts within their groups; thus, all deadlines had to agree with the producer's expectations. When each group had its contracts completed, production schedules were written on the blackboard, and directors were ready to guide the daily progress of their groups toward the final productions.

PRODUCTION PHASE

In the first several days of this phase, groups were fragmented, preparing their various aspects of the productions: Actors/actresses memorized lines and improvised action; technicians practiced with

equipment and worked with producers to prepare a script which gave directions to each camera and to the special effects generator. This last job was mammoth. It required the students to visualize action and to select camera angles and shots that would be at once both convenient and effective. It took much time to get a working script. Later, many changes evolved as camera crews practiced during rehearsals.

Throughout the production phase, no one was idle for a moment. Students were in any vacant room available, practicing lines, making backdrop scenery, printing credits to be recorded at the start of filming, hanging microphones, setting up lights and video equipment, and many other tasks that became necessary—and all at their own initiation.

During the final week of the course, we filmed rehearsals to give technicians experience with problems in the script and implementing it, and to provide actors and directors an easy means of self-evaluation. Many changes in blocking, action, camera shots, and special effects occurred during this time.

In the final three days of class, we recorded the two productions as performances. For the first time in these recordings, we included credits and accompanying music at the beginning and recorded the entire productions from beginning to end. In all, we recorded each play three times, each one showing improvement over the previous ones.

Summer was the optimal time for such a unit as this, for I had my pick of media and equipment from all over the county. In my planning I consulted the county's director of television and audio-visual services to learn of my possibilities in recording. He was able to secure from various high schools and middle schools two black and white video cameras, a videotape recorder, several blank videotapes, and—the most motivating piece of equipment we used—a special effects generator. The generator was used to record from two cameras; it allowed us to dissolve from cam to cam, to fade in and out, to show on split screen two different shots, and to preview effects before putting them into the program.

As it evolved, the younger (and usually, male) students chose to work the video equipment, while the older students (with notable exceptions) took jobs of producer/director and actor. Each person felt the excitment of production from his peculiar and indispensible perspective.

During the final week, it appeared to us that we had bitten off more than we could chew, but as we neared our deadline, each child concentrated the effort needed to complete the job. The class was an overwhelming success, a fact which was made clear in several ways.

On the night of our penultimate class, the summer school held its open house—the usual show-and-tell bazaar. We planned to continue the production of our final recordings (we were on our third take in each of the two plays) in front of our parent audience. With the first group, the parents saw the complexity of our

task: Two cameras; a technician switching from camera to camera according to scripted cues; camera crews reading scripts and adjusting to long and close shots according to the direction of the special effects technician; actors maintaining volume and actions appropriate for recording; scenery being changed . . . All went more smoothly than expected.

Then came the second play, *Tom Meets Becky*, an adaptation and digest of several scenes from Twain's *Tom Sawyer*. I expected this production to be a smash hit . . . until the special effects technician—the person most crucial to the successful recording of the play—tugged at my right sleeve and whispered timidly that he had forgotten his script. Flushed and disappointed, I decided to proceed and improvise at the special effects generator. (After all, I could help him with his task at the generator!)

The acting and recording went well until we reached a scene where the special effects generator had a series of rapid switches between cameras. At one point, still unsure of my fifth grade technician's ability to make flawless switches, I urgently told him to make a switch. Without looking over at me, he held the shot he had (not making the suggested change). I realized that he was right; the original script had not called for a change, and he knew it. It was then that I realized that Michael was boss and that I had better keep my hands out of the works. That night's performance without the script was by far the best we had.

Somewhat more than fifty people observed the dynamics of the productions. There were only twenty-two students in the class. I heard that several children in the audience who were supposed to be performing elsewhere missed their performances because they watched ours. Two parents asked to have copies of the tapes we had made; others marveled at their antsy fifth graders' enthusiasm and skill; and all parents and visitors praised the achievement that had taken only four weeks to accomplish.

When I returned to school in the fall, I learned that our county holds a film festival competition in the spring and that winners of that festival advance to a statewide competition. This seemed to be a perfect "market" for our productions of last summer, so I mailed each student a letter explaining my intention to enter the films and asking for their participation.

I received fourteen responses, all of which were enthusiastically supportive; and on a Friday in April, the fourteen appeared at the festival. The only disappointment was that our film placed second behind a high-school video production.

At the festival many of the students said that they would return to the summer class. Additionally, in their responses to my invitation to participate in the film festival several students referred to the summer school course as one which they will not forget. Their words show best that language arts can be the best part of summer vacation:

I would be interested in attending the festival. My whole family is interested in attending.

Megan L. (actress)

I would like to say that I enjoyed summer school very much. I would like to participate in the festival, too.

Cindy L. (camera)

When I took the class I was only in fifth grade and I was just doing the camera work for fun. I think this opportunity (the festival) would be the first time I could take the cameras seriously.

Jeff B. (camera)

I really had a lot of fun this summer and it is my deepest hope that we can repeat the class this summer. I knew as soon as I saw the address on the envelope it was from you. I was so excited when I heard about the film festival!

Cammie W. (producer)

I had a wonderful summer and thanks to you the best part was summer school.

Leslie W. (producer/actress)